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SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/UMB AND EUR/AGS - VIKMANIS-KELLER

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIA EAGER FOR CLOSE COORDINATION ON BELARUS,

LOOKS TOWARD EU PRESIDENCY

REF: STATE 188900

Classified By: Economic-Political Counselor Gregory E. Phillips. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

- [1](#)1. (C) Summary: Austria welcomes the U.S. approach to promote democracy in Belarus, and looks forward to close coordination during its EU Presidency in the first half of [2](#)006. It will be necessary to identify the targets for outreach, with a focus on opinion-leading elites. An approach to the economy could take account of the impact of Russian WTO accession. The views of Russia and of Belarus' neighbors would be important to the implementation of our strategy. Continued dialogue with Belarus in certain fora would help, but pressure would be key. End summary.
- [2](#)2. (U) EconPolCouns delivered reftel points on October 19 to Hanns Porias, the Austrian MFA's Assistant Secretary-level Director for East and Southeast Europe.
- [3](#)3. (C) Porias strongly welcomed the U.S. initiative. He said Belarus has been a point of focus in Brussels, and the General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) would likely address Belarus soon. Porias said he had participated in a troika meeting in London on Belarus, a meeting in which Ukraine also participated. Belarus would be a very important issue during Austria's EU Presidency during the first half of [2](#)006.
- [4](#)4. (C) Porias applauded the strategy of expanding outreach to Belarusian society. He noted that a key question would be whom to target. Now, for the first time, there was a single candidate to symbolize the opposition, in the person of Aleksandr Milinkevich. But the issue remained of how to reach the right circles in Belarus. Porias argued that it was important to reach influential elites in Belarusian society -- not the top layer, but those just below them, who were important opinion leaders. Porias expressed skepticism about the degree to which Belarusian NGOs could contribute to the process of outreach. The fact that NGO leaders could travel freely was a cause of suspicion -- "either they're coopted or they're infiltrated," he said.
- [5](#)5. (C) The economy was another area of focus. Porias said that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko had been relatively successful in buying a certain level of popular

support by propping up the economy. In this connection, Porias said he was interested in discussing the consequences of Russian membership in the World Trade Organization for the Belarusian economic situation.

16. (C) The views of Belarus' neighbors was important, and Porias agreed with the U.S. approach in this regard. He said Russia's interest was primarily in stability, and he was starting to hear talk among Russian policy makers that Lukashenko may not, after all, be the only hope for stability in Belarus. It would be important to maintain a close dialogue with the Russians, he said. Porias noted that the personal relationship between Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin was not terribly good -- in fact, Lukashenko had a much better personal relationship with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko. Porias agreed with our view of the need to engage with countries which neighbor Belarus and which have gone through a transition to democracy, such as Ukraine and Poland.

17. (C) Porias argued for the Austrian position that it is important not to isolate Belarus, which would only give Lukashenko free rein to continue his anti-democratic policies inside the country. Instead, it was important to maintain a process of dialogue. Porias pointed to the Central European Initiative, of which Belarus is a member, as a possible forum for such dialogue. That said, Porias was no Pollyanna on Lukashenko -- he agreed that the main thrust of a Belarus strategy had to be pressure for a democratic transition.

van Voorst